

## ON DETERMINING WHAT COUNTS WHILE COUNTING: ASPECTS OF LANGUAGE TESTING WHERE DIVERSITY IS THE STANDARD

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*This article takes an interest in language testing where the tests are set to serve two purposes: (i) to decide whether the test taker is sufficiently proficient in the language of learning at a higher education institution to advise admission to a study programme at the institution, and (ii) to inform the development of language support programmes aimed at improving the academic literacy skills of students learning through medium of a second language at such an education institution. Examples of student work illustrate the kinds of concerns language teachers and testers have to deal with. Second language speakers of the language of learning at higher education institutions, and how they perceive their own proficiencies, are in focus. Positive self-assessment is often at odds with the scores achieved in academic work. Tests developed to gauge the test taker's performance in tasks typical of the academic discourses s/he will encounter in higher education programmes, often show up difficulties that are not calculated in the planning of curricula or of classroom practices. Reference is made to recent research done in multilingual communities elsewhere, that may inform local teaching, testing, curriculum development and research.*

### INTRODUCTION

In multilingual communities language choice in education is determined not only by the distribution of speakers of various languages, but also by the relative power of languages and the related speech communities. Which languages will be used in education, and which languages will be taught as primary, additional or 'other' languages, is decided only partly by the numbers of speakers of a given language. An important factor in selecting a language of learning in a multilingual context is more often the ability of a language to facilitate socio-economic growth and mobility. Frequently, academic literacy in a powerful language such as English in South Africa is central to admission or not into higher education as well as to students' success in learning. Bilingual or multilingual educational institutions have to decide which levels of language proficiency will be required in the various languages used in education, and how linguistic diversity will be encouraged and rewarded (or not).

I shall elaborate these introductory remarks by referring to the diversity of languages in one region in South Africa, the Western Cape, and by attending to questions related to language proficiency of students at higher education institutions in this region. Demographically, three of the eleven languages have significant numbers of speakers in the Western Cape, namely Afrikaans, English and Xhosa. Three universities in relatively close proximity have all

recognised the importance of well developed language skills for success in tertiary level teaching and learning. Countrywide, Afrikaans and Xhosa represent two of the languages with the most first language speakers per language: roughly 17.5%<sup>1</sup> of the population speak Afrikaans as their first language (L1) and roughly 18.5% of the population speak Xhosa as their L1. In contrast, roughly 8% of the population speak English as their L1. However, English is the second language (L2) of a majority of the population, thus it is widely used as *lingua franca*, and as such is often referred to as the dominant South African language (cf. Ridge 2000). In primary and secondary education English and Afrikaans are privileged: speakers of these two languages have the possibility of education through medium of their first languages from the first to the twelfth (final) school year. The position of speakers of the other nine official languages has been, and still is, rather different. During the former dispensation (i.e. before 1994) a system was established which prevails, where children with an indigenous African language as L1 start their schooling in their first language, but transfer to English or (less often) to Afrikaans from the fourth year<sup>2</sup>. At present, tertiary education is offered in only these two official languages, the ones used as languages of learning in secondary schools.

Thus, the large majority of the school going population, from the fourth school year onwards, officially receive their formal education not in their home language, but in a second language. At tertiary level most students are taught and learn through medium of a second language. Worldwide English has developed as a *lingua franca* of academia. This dictates that regardless of which L1 a student may have, and regardless of which language functions as the language of learning at a tertiary institution, for access to academic literature, students need to have achieved a reasonable level of proficiency in English. To gain access to higher education and to eventually succeed in tertiary studies, South African students need to have mastered at least fair receptive language skills in English. Some institutions require students to show by means of specially designed tests, that their English language skills are of a sufficiently high level to ensure they can take part in the full range of intellectual tasks and activities of the programmes on offer. Even Afrikaans students at a predominantly Afrikaans institute of higher education such as Stellenbosch University, need a fair level of English proficiency to proceed and succeed academically.

This article focuses on language testing in situations where the language tests are set to serve two purposes: (i) to decide whether the test-taker is sufficiently proficient in the language of learning at a higher education institution and to advise admission to a particular study programme at the institution, and (ii) to inform the development of language support programmes aimed at improving the academic literacy skills of students learning through medium of a second language at such a higher education institution. The article will also consider how research done outside of the specific context in which we work, such as work in the ALTE<sup>3</sup>-framework, may inform the development of various testing and support initiatives.

In this article, I will first refer to characterising features of multilingualism in South Africa and consider how these relate to questions of standards and diversity presented in higher education institutions in the country, more specifically in the Western Cape. Second, examples of student work will be presented to illustrate some of the linguistic phenomena encountered by stakeholders interested in language standards and academic standards of students learning through a second language. Third, I will outline different kinds of tests used to assess students' language skills on entry into their first year at university. Fourth, I will consider different kinds of support offered for developing academic literacy skills at universities in the Western Cape. Fifth, I will give some particulars of self-assessment that

may be useful in determining students' motivation in making use of the various kinds of support offered. Finally, I will draw some conclusions as to 'what counts' and 'what needs to be counted'<sup>4</sup> in language testing on university entrance in the institutions referred to.

## MULTILINGUALISM, STANDARDS AND DIVERSITY

Language testing in Europe (which is the domain in which ALTE is situated) often takes place in a setting where there is an established community of speakers of 'big' languages, of languages spoken by large numbers of citizens and often used officially in more countries than the European state, e.g. English, Spanish, French or German. Most of the member states of the European Union would characterise themselves as multilingual in that a variety of languages are in use, even among citizens of the state. Nevertheless, individual bilingualism or multilingualism is generally not a prerequisite for access to and success in education: a monolingual French speaker can enjoy full citizenship rights, including educational opportunities, in France; similarly, a monolingual English speaker can enjoy full citizenship rights, including educational opportunities, in the UK, a monolingual German speaker can enjoy the same in Germany, and in most instances a monolingual speaker of Spanish can enjoy such opportunities in Spain. Speakers of minority languages in such states are largely people relatively recently migrated, so-called 'foreigners', or citizens identifiable as the descendants of such foreigners. Often, the educational issues that make some form of language testing necessary are related to the difficulties that arise from the bilingualism or multilingualism of speakers of foreign origin. The majority language which is used as language of learning is the second (or third) language of such students. Where the students' proficiency is not of a sufficiently advanced level to enable them to achieve similar success in learning as L1 learners do, language testing becomes an important aspect of support programmes.

Contrastively, in South Africa, the established community of citizens is made up of speakers of a variety of first languages. Considering the numbers of L1 speakers of each of the official languages, there is in the strict sense of the word, no majority language (the largest language group, speakers of Zulu, forms roughly 22% of the population). Former national policies favoured the development and use of both Afrikaans and English. Recently accepted language policy (cf. the language policy adopted in 2002), attempts to put right the former dismissive stance towards indigenous African languages, for instance by the official recognition of such a wide range of languages, and by providing translation or interpretation services 'where practicable'<sup>5</sup>. In spite of particularly liberal new legislation, the improved official status of a language such as Xhosa<sup>6</sup> is not reflected in educational practice, or for that matter, in public services or in workplaces. As is indicated above, students who are L1 speakers of 9 of the official languages are for the larger part schooled in a second language by teachers who are themselves L2 speakers of the language of teaching and learning.

In such circumstances linguistic diversity is a given – it is in fact, the standard and not merely an unforeseen result of more or less accommodating immigration policies. Individual bi- and multilingualism is not an accidental or optional characteristic among individuals; outside of the more remote rural areas, it is the rule. Consideration of standards relates to at least three notions of 'standard' in a context where the particular language used, has marked implications for access and success in higher education. There are notions of

- (i) the standards set in language tests
- (ii) the standard language as opposed to local varieties of each language
- (iii) general standards of education.

Concerns about maintaining respectable and competitive standards in academic work have prompted an acute interest in language as an instrument in learning. Such concerns as well as concern about high failure or drop-out rates among university entrants, have also ensured a keen interest in language tests that will 'count' in such a way that fair selection is achieved, that reliable predictions on students' academic progress can be made, and that proper support can be given in reasonable circumstances.

## AUTHENTIC DATA: ENGLISH L2 AS THE LANGUAGE OF LEARNING

Here I shall introduce selected examples of work produced by students that I taught at various stages. These were students in their first year at Stellenbosch University where undergraduate teaching is predominantly in Afrikaans, and students in their first year at the University of the Western Cape, where undergraduate teaching is predominantly in English. The first set of data are drawn from test answers in an introductory English Linguistics course where, regardless of their L1 or in fact of the default language of learning at the university, students presented their work in English. The second set of data is drawn from test answers in an introductory course to Sociolinguistics where, in keeping with the default language of learning at the university, students with various L1s presented their work in English. The data are presented without an elaborate error analysis; the intention is

- (i) to give an impression of different kinds of errors made by students with different first languages,
- (ii) to introduce the argument that where there are a variety of Englishes one should be tolerant of dialectal peculiarities, and
- (iii) to introduce some considerations on the kinds of tests, as well as the kinds of support, required for securing the ideal of maintaining standards while sustaining diversity.

### *Data Set 1, Question 1 (SIQ1)*

Students were asked to consider a newspaper headline that, decontextualised, is ambiguous: **'Miners Refuse to Work after Death'**.

They had to indicate first whether they recognised any ambiguity at all. Second they had to explain any ambiguity they had recognised by paraphrasing the various meanings. In the examples given below, Student A has English as L1, Student B has Afrikaans as L1, Student C has Xhosa as L1, and Student D has Chinese as L1.

A

*Yes, the headline is definitely ambiguous. The intended meaning is that miners refuse to work after the death of one of their colleagues (while in the mines); however, ambiguity comes into play with one portion of the sentence, 'after death'. In a literal sense, this signifies that the miners refuse to work after they themselves are dead.*

B

*'Miners Refuse to Work after Death'. Ambiguity is when there is a simultaneous interpretation, of a phrase or a word. Miners do not want to work because of the Death of what? This is what happens with ambiguity, it leaves room for alternative reactions. This qualifies as ambiguous, because it leaves room for alternative reactions. You get structural ambiguity and Lexical ambiguity. The headline is syntactic, because one did not know what cause 'death' or what is 'dead'.*

C

*The topic qualifies for 'Ambiguity'. Death in this headline could either mean 'the act of dying' – for instance after the explosion on the mines or can mean 'death of hope' as in extinction when there are negotiations. For sure when those hope dies, as the salary raise, minimum shifts, miners could refuse to work.*

D

*This sentence qualify as ambiguous, in fact it is the referential ambiguous. the sentence could be understood as 'Miners Refuse to Work after their Death' or 'Miners Refuse to Work after somebody's Death'. therefore, without clear referention. the sentence qualifies as ambiguous.*

### **Data Set 1, Question 2 (S1Q2)**

The same group of students in English Linguistics were given a number of statements of which they first had to decide whether what each proposed was true or false, and second had to explain their decision by elaborating on or correcting the statement. In this case the statement to be considered was: **Human communication is a simple process of encoding and decoding language.** The answers of student B (Afrikaans L1) and student C (Xhosa L1) are cited below.

B

*This is also false. Communication envolves more. One have to understand the language to communicate. One can communicate through signs and symbols, but one can misunderstood each other. Communication is language and language is communication.*

C

*It is true.*

*Though encoding & decoding can be used; of human communication; uses more of the 'Language' as to convey meanings & messages sent to us by others. For instance --δ For a new parent; i.e. a new mother for the first time; still has to learn the messages sent by the child, for instance; when the child is hungry or wet. This could take weeks before the mother grasp it. Thus; at the end if the child was capable of 'communicating' verbally; the mother wouldn't have had to go the stress of encoding & decoding as to making the meaning of the child's cry.*

### **Data Set 2 (S2)**

The questions set in this case were aimed (i) at highlighting the theoretical notions of dialect and dialectal difference, and (ii) at testing students' ability of applying such theory to local circumstances to which they could easily relate. The particular questions were the following:

- (a) In the study of the dialects of a language, are the only significant differences phonological differences? Give a clear reason for your answer.
- (b) Consider the dialectal diversity that has developed between Xhosa spoken in rural areas in the Eastern Cape and Xhosa spoken in an Eastern Cape city like Port Elizabeth. Give reasons why such diversity has developed.

In the examples given below students E, F, G and H all have Xhosa as L1.

E

(a) *No. There are other differences like morphological and syntactic differences.*

(b) *Xhosa in rural areas and Xhosa in cities are not the same in that people tend to consider these factors that the difference clear. Firstly they consider the geographical region that people living different region have their accent. Secondly people consider age. They argue that older people use their styles of a formal ways of speaking. Lastly they consider sex – females have their own ways of speaking.*

F

(a) *It is due to these following reason their status that occupy in the society and also the age of the person and geographical location.*

(b) *I because of geographical location the person who is in urban areas his/her language is mixed with other language and secondly the due to socio economic class may be the person is with working with other group which is not speaking his/her language and thirdly the age of the person.*

G

(a) *In a study of the dialects of a language, are the only significant differences phonological differences like language and gender where you can talk about a language that is used for woman and a language that is used for man.*

(b) *The dialectal diversity that has developed between Xhosa spoken in rural areas in the Eastern Cape and Xhosa spoken in an Eastern Cape city like P.E. is that people from rural areas who speak Xhosa are moving with the city so they speak the language (Xhosa) that is used in the city so that is why diversity has developed.*

H

(a) *Phonological difference. People's speech differ in various ways. People might speak the same language in a different accent.*

(b) *People in the rural areas speak Xhosa in a cultural concept whereas in Port Elizabeth people are mordinized and change their way of speaking.*

One could analyse these answers from various perspectives. One would be to look at aspects of linguistic accuracy such as spelling, punctuation and basic grammar. Another, more complex approach would be to explore pragmatic aspects and cognitive aspects, such as argumentation, interpretation and ability to articulate clearly (cf. Bardovi-Harlig 1996, 1999; Hamp-Lyons 1991; Kasper and Rose 2002).

Comparing S1Q1A and S1Q1D for example, it is clear that the Chinese L1 student has recognised the ambiguity as well as the English L1 student has. Both of these students have difficulty in articulating precisely what kind of ambiguity is instantiated, and in providing paraphrases that would disambiguate the headline. S1Q1B and S1Q1C, the Afrikaans L1 and Xhosa L1 students, show no proper recognition of the ambiguity, nor do they show an ability to broadly define the notion of 'ambiguity'.

The answers given in S1Q2 exhibit weak proficiency in various aspects of grammar and punctuation (e.g. 'one can misunderstood each other'(S1Q2B), 'Though encoding & decoding can be used; of human communication; uses more of the 'Language' as to convey meanings & messages sent to us by others.'(S1Q2C)). Nevertheless, of greater concern is that these answers do not reflect a clear sense of how to use phrases and sentences as communicative units.

The answer given in S2E for (a) exhibits an understanding of what the exact question required: the first part of the question required a simple 'yes' or 'no'; for (b) it shows the

candidate understood she was required to justify her answer to (a). The answer given in S2F (a) and (b), however, does not exhibit similar understanding. This student has not recognised that a simple 'yes' or 'no' is required. S/he has given reasons for the development of dialectal diversity (social and geographical distance or isolation) instead of reasons for why phonological difference cannot be regarded as the only kind of dialectal difference.

The answers cited cannot be accommodated as being instantiations of Englishes other than the standard that should be tolerated because they simply represent alternative linguistic varieties. The difficulties seem to lie at a more fundamental argumentational, cognitive or metacognitive level.

The questions of interest that arise are:

- What kind of entry test would be required to predict whether students with language proficiencies as these illustrated above, could be successful in the particular courses offered at tertiary level?
- What kind of language awareness would students need in order to recognise themselves the particular skills that they would need to develop?
- What kind of support program would be suitable to address the development of linguistic and argumentative skills that appear to be lacking in the work illustrated above?

There are no easy answers to any of these questions. Nevertheless, it may be useful to consider the nature of current tests and interventions that are being developed, and to reflect on how they relate to relevant research done elsewhere.

## ASSESSING LANGUAGE SKILLS IN THE LANGUAGE(S) OF LEARNING

South African universities are keenly aware of the need to test language competences and skills of students entering higher education for the first time. Such tests generally serve to assist in early identification of students at risk of failing or dropping out due to insufficient proficiency in the language of learning. Considering that such large numbers of students study through medium of an L2, the numbers of students at risk due to difficulties related to language capacity are relatively high. In some instances the tests may have a gatekeeping function, as part of a selection process to decide on entrance or not into courses that have fairly high requirements and a limited intake, such as medicine or law. Results of these tests taken on university entrance are used also to decide which students need to register for support.

The results could of course be useful in deciding on the structure and content of support programmes. There is a great deal of concern about developing academic literacy skills, universities and other higher education institutions are putting considerable resources into projects that support students who are limitedly proficient in the language-of-learning, and many lecturers take great pains in developing suitable courses. Considerable effort is going into the development of various kinds of entrance tests (see e.g. Van Dyk & Weideman 2004). Nevertheless, I am not aware of current projects dedicated to monitoring specifically washback from the language proficiency tests (sometimes referred to and accordingly structured as academic literacy tests). There is certainly a need for developing projects that directly link insights gained from the outcomes of admissions tests to the content, teaching

and assessment methods used in the language support courses. (For the relation between validity and washback, see also Messick, 1999).

At the two institutions where I have been working in the last 15 years, results from tests taken on entry are used in conjunction with results gained elsewhere. So, for example, at the University of the Western Cape in the late 1990s the tests taken on entry were mainly used to advise candidates who had only just qualified for university entrance in terms of national matriculation results. On the basis a candidate's matriculation results and the test results each would be advised whether to register or not, and if they should register, whether to enter a programme geared for greater support than the regular courses would offer. The results of the general TELP test (Test of English Language Proficiency) that was used at the time were supplemented by an essay and an interview with each candidate.

In deciding on whether to allow admission and in advising on the need for support, the University of Stellenbosch currently relies on results of three different kinds:

- (i) those achieved in a general entrance test set by the university, which all candidates take before registration, often a couple of months before writing the final school exam;
- (ii) those achieved in the matric exam, the final, national schoolleavers' exam, and
- (iii) those achieved in language placement tests which measure not only language proficiency, but also more general academic literacy skills such as structure of argumentation, interpretation and use of statistical data represented in charts and graphs, and so on. These tests have been developed by a team of experts<sup>7</sup> well informed on the local educational policies and practices, and are being used by at least two other South African universities.

The University of Cape Town runs an Alternative Admissions Research Project (AARP) that administers a set of 4 admissions tests, the AARP tests. One of these tests, the Proficiency Test of English for Educational Purposes (PTEEP), specifically assesses students' ability to use English in the academic environment. The results of these tests are used not only to advise on the admission of students who do not directly fit admissions criteria; they are also used to decide on early admission of strong candidates and to advise students on registering for academic support.

The various tests and results referred to above are largely used for the predictions they can make at an early stage, on likely student performance. They have up to now not been used systematically to inform programmes of language teaching or processes of language learning. There are indeed some very good evaluations and reports (cf. Thesen and Angelil-Carter 1993, Gough 2000, Thesen 2001, Paxton 2003, Van der Walt and Steyn 2004) on some of the courses and on the work of some very dedicated teachers. Yet, between teaching and testing and between research, testing, and curricula, there appears to be limited and mostly fortuitous interaction.

Following the outcomes of research by e.g. Purpura (1997), it may be advisable to start setting up more systematic links between tests (e.g. what is tested, what test results indicate) and programmes of teaching and learning. Using sophisticated statistical methods, Purpura (1997: 289ff.) investigated the relationships between strategies reported by test-takers and the performance of such test-takers on second language tests (SLTP). Participants were 1382



learners of English L2 at 17 centres in Spain, Turkey and the Czech Republic. Building on seminal work by Bachman (1990) and Bachman and Palmer (1996) on cognitive processing, Purpura developed a set of metacognitive processing variables that could be monitored in the English proficiency tests set by the EFL Division of UCLES<sup>8</sup>, 1994. He found that the relationships between strategy use and SLTP 'are extremely complex, and at times very subtle' (Purpura 1997: 324), but that nonetheless, the study had valuable implications for SLA and language testing research. For example, the study brought new insight into the nature of 'strategic competence', the interaction between strategic competence and language ability, the advantages of cognitive and metacognitive strategy training, the negative impact of memorizing strategies on SLTP, the effect of test-taking style on performance, and how information is understood remembered and retrieved in tests.

My suggestion is that on the one hand language proficiency tests taken at university entrance should be informed by studies such as the one referred to here, and on the other hand outcomes of these tests should inform SL educators and learners (e.g. those working on or studying in foundation programmes), assisting them in developing curricula, materials and appropriate methods of teaching and learning.

### ***Support programmes: testing and developing listening skills***

Different universities have responded in different ways to their awareness of student needs regarding support in the language of learning. In the Western Cape region the University of Cape Town (UCT) has a Centre for Higher Education Development (CHED), the University of the Western Cape (UWC) has a Centre for Lifelong Learning, and Stellenbosch University (SU) has Academic Support Services that include a Centre for Teaching and Learning and a Language Centre. In providing literacy-and-learning support, UWC introduced a one-year credit-bearing course in English for Educational Development (EED) which is obligatory for all students in the Arts Faculty, regardless of their performance in the entrance tests. In time the course was extended to nurture academic literacy skills in other faculties as well. Stellenbosch University uses its Language Centre, as well as specific language departments to provide language support for 'at risk' students. The support services of writing consultants are also available by referral or on demand.

As the language of learning at UCT and UWC is English<sup>9</sup>, support programmes focus on developing English language skills. The situation at the University of Stellenbosch is more complex and so perhaps also more interesting. Of the 5 South African universities<sup>10</sup> that up to 1994 had Afrikaans as the language of learning, Stellenbosch is the only one that has taken an explicit policy decision to protect and develop the use of Afrikaans in the domain of higher education, and particularly in undergraduate courses. The other 4 historically Afrikaans universities have developed more and less formalised policies of bilingual education that continue the use of Afrikaans but also extensively accommodate the use of English, e.g. by providing interpreting services or by parallel teaching of groups in either English or Afrikaans. The decision of Stellenbosch University does present a number of challenges to teachers and students in terms of bilingual capacity. Although Afrikaans is the default language in undergraduate lectures, where for bridging purposes, bilingual teaching is allowed in courses where Afrikaans is used in no less than 50% of a course. Such 'bridging' is meant to provide temporary support for students in the process of developing their Afrikaans L2 proficiency. There are various provisions for students who are L1 speakers of other languages. One such a provision is that they are free to do assignments, tests and examinations in English. There is in fact no prohibition on students speaking or writing in

English<sup>11</sup>. Considering that academic literature is largely available in English, the policy effectively means that students to whom Afrikaans is a second language, need well developed listening skills in the default language of learning. Although listening skills do not develop in isolation from other receptive or productive skills, it may be useful to consider some insights gained from research that has focussed on listening skills.

Of interest here is the work of Gary Buck (1991, 2001) on the testing of listening comprehension. His work indicates that in the early 1990s there were hardly any ‘sufficiently clearly stated hypotheses about the listening process which could form the basis of research’ (Buck 1991: 68). Using verbal reports on introspection, valuable data have since been collected on listening comprehension test methods and how such methods affect listening-test scores, on listening sub-skills which include linguistic processing, on listeners’ processes of monitoring their comprehension, on the listening purpose and how this influences comprehension, and on questions as to the way question previews could benefit test performance. Of similar interest would be a study conducted by Wu Yi’an (1998) among Chinese EFL test-takers that investigated how listening processes led to comprehension or to breakdown of comprehension. In this study an immediate retrospective verbal report procedure was used to monitor how participants used linguistic and non-linguistic knowledge in performing listening comprehension tasks, and how the test format affected participants’ performance.

Again, I would suggest that in a context where listening skills appear to be decisive for participation in the regular teaching and learning events at a university, we can profit from thorough consideration of the reports on research done elsewhere, such as those on the projects mentioned above. Brown and Yule (1989) pointed out that listeners generally listen for a purpose, and this purpose affects their level of motivation as well as the listening strategies they choose. Suitably motivated students who understand the nature of lectures as communicative events will have less difficulty in developing listening strategies suited to the particular context. In the following section I shall consider another aspect of motivation related to L2 use in learning, namely self-assessment of L2 learners.

### *Self-assessment of language-of-learning skills*

My assumption is that self-assessment is an important factor in motivation to develop L2 productive and receptive skills. If a learner rates his/her skills highly, there will be less motivation to put an effort into further development; if, however, a learner rates his/her skills as less adequate, there will be more motivation to put an effort into further development. On this assumption it is important to consider the self-assessment of students who deliver work of the kind illustrated in the data given above.

Data collected at Western Cape universities give some insight into students’ self-assessment of their language skills. First, there was a fairly extensive project in the late 1990s at UWC reported by Gough and Bock (2002) where students were asked to narrate their own experiences of English L2 learning. These essays reflected that by the age of 18/19 years many learners felt confident that their skills were ‘good’ or ‘good enough’ for the challenges of further study. Their performances in regular academic work however, did not support this. Second, in an enquiry of more limited scope at the beginning of 2005 at SU, I corroborated self-assessment of students with their performance in undergraduate work. In all, data were collected from 90 participants whose average age was 20 years. Of these participants 69 reported Afrikaans as L1 and 21 reported English as L1. Asked to rate their overall

proficiency in their L2 on a scale of 5, 63 of the Afrikaans L1 participants (=91.3%) gave themselves a rating of between 4 and 5, i.e. as having near-L1 English proficiency; 5 (=7.2 %) gave themselves a rating of 3, thus as having average to fair English proficiency; 1 participant (=1.5%) who indicated Afrikaans as L1, actually indicated that his English proficiency was better than his Afrikaans proficiency, although for both languages he estimated his proficiency to be on L1 or near-L1 level. Asked similarly to rate their overall proficiency in their L2, 6 of the English L1 participants (=28.6%) gave themselves a rating of between 4 and 5, i.e. as having near-L1 Afrikaans proficiency; 14 (=66.7 %) gave themselves a rating of 3, thus as having average to fair Afrikaans proficiency; 1 student (=4.7%) gave herself a rating of between 1 and 2, thus as having rather weak Afrikaans proficiency. These results can be summarised as follows:

Afrikaans L1 self-assessment of English proficiency			English L1 self-assessment of Afrikaans proficiency		
Rating	Number of respondents	Percentage	Rating	Number of respondents	Percentage
4-5	64	92.8%	4-5	6	28.6%
3	5	7.2%	3	14	66.7%
1-2	0	0%	1-2	1	4.7%

Clearly a more extensive investigation and analysis of such self-assessment is required to make confident generalisations. Nevertheless, there are a number of likely explanations for the discrepancy between Afrikaans L1 and English L1 participants' self-assessments. In undergraduate lectures this particular group of Afrikaans L1 students can draw largely on their L1 skills, mostly requiring only reading skills in their L2. In the same setting English L1 students require specific listening skills, and to a lesser extent reading skills in their L2. It is likely that Afrikaans L1 students confronted more forcibly with the task of applying English listening skills, would experience less comfort and thus give ratings similar to the self-assessments of the English L1 participants. Further likely explanations to be investigated would be motivation at an earlier stage to learn Afrikaans as an L2 as opposed to learning English as an L2, methods of teaching and learning the L2, and so on.

McKinney & Priestly (2004) report on the self-assessment of German-Slovene bilinguals in Karinthia, Austria. They found a trend generally to overestimate one's own proficiency in the L2, or at least in those L2 skills that are developed at a later stage and limitedly used. A tendency not to recognise or articulate the L2 aspects that are not sufficiently developed for use in a given domain appears to be common. For the development of L2 language-of-learning skills this implies that limited recognition of less developed skills, may contribute to less motivation for seeking or following advice on language support programmes. Students may ascribe their poor test performance to shortcomings in the test or test conditions rather than to their own levels of proficiency that could be improved in well developed programmes. If proficiency tests are to be trusted as true indicators of competences and skills, and so also as indicators of test takers' need for development of proficiency, systematic research into what counts and what can be counted, seems advisable.

### ***What counts and what needs to be counted in diagnostic university entrance tests***

I would categorize the tests currently used to measure and monitor students' proficiency in the language(s) of learning on admission to university, as 'diagnostic'. They are largely intended to determine levels of competence, and to predict possibilities of success or failure in academic endeavours. Where the probability of failure appears to be high, timeous intervention in the form of various kinds of support programmes, is advised if not obliged. Currently the tests have a limited gate-keeping function. Where they do have such a function, they are certainly 'high stakes tests'. As indicated earlier, admission to a number of study programmes may be in part determined by the language proficiencies of candidates. More often, however, the results will be used in advising candidates as to what the better choices of study programme and support would be. Currently, at the highest level of planning and administration in the University, there is intense awareness of the need to invest human and financial resources into the development not only of the admissions tests, but particularly also of support for candidates who do not perform well in such tests.

Considering a number of the directives I have come across in materials produced by e.g. members of ALTE, I would suggest that in taking further the work of language proficiency testing and development in the local South African context, we need attention to matters such as the following:

- When language proficiency tests are introduced, validity questions need to be addressed. It is important to have clarity on what needs to be tested, and to find methods of assuring the validity of the test relative to the purpose of the test. (See, for example, Messick 1989, 1999) It is possible that various stakeholders have different perceptions of what needs to be tested, what is actually being tested, how the results can or should be interpreted, how results can or should be used, and so on. Such differences need to be addressed productively, to assure maximum effectiveness of the process.
- The interests of all stakeholders need to be co-ordinated. Stakeholders include the test developers, test administrators, institutions with an interest in the test results, and – fairly obviously – test-takers themselves.
- Specific attention should be given to ethical questions. Impressive work has been done by scholars such as Davies (1997), Shohamy (1997), Spolsky (1997) and Messick (1989). Such work deserves wider attention. Ethical issues they have raised include the way in which tests should show consideration for the variety of cultural, educational and linguistic backgrounds of test-takers, and the fairness of properly informing participants on what will be tested, for which purposes, how results will be used, and so on.
- The effect of 'washback' should be exploited in two ways: (i) in assuring that pre-test programmes will attend to pertinent and critical issues, and (ii) in assuring that post-test programmes will address areas identified as 'weak spots'.
- Differences in contextual settings should not prohibit reference to useful work done elsewhere. Although the peculiarities of local circumstances certainly need to be considered and integrated into the way such research outcomes are eventually used, research done elsewhere that may be informative, should be followed. Examples of such research include the study by Storey (1997) on the ability (or not) of certain types of questions to provide information on cognitive processing skills, or the study by Schmidt (1999) on the generalisability of results on knowledge of vocabulary to

insight on other kinds of knowledge. (cf. also Lewcowicz, 2000, Swain, 2001, and Moyer, 2004).

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, I would like to mention three aspects of the local language testing scene at Stellenbosch University that seem to provide a positive basis for future development. First, across a wide range of disciplines, there appears to be a sincere commitment to attaining not only high standards of language testing and language use, but also respectable and competitive academic standards suitable to higher education in a globalising context. Simultaneously, there is appreciation of the diversity of the local community: various university policies are focussed not only on sustaining diversity, but in fact also on celebrating the linguistic and cultural diversity, even while acknowledging the difficulties brought about by historic and contemporary inequity.

Second, at present the university is afforded a rather unique opportunity for research in that language support programmes are not (yet) obligatory for all students. For the past two years all students entering for the first time, sat a new language placement test. In the Arts Faculty (e.g.) there is a project underway to compare the academic progress of those who follow advice to register for support, to the progress of those who choose not to follow such advice (or perhaps for other reasons are not able to follow such advice). This will give insight into the structure, use and effect of the support programmes, and will be used to inform similar and new kinds of support in the future.

Third, common concerns about the relation between higher education teaching and learning on the one hand, and language competences and skills on the other, have invigorated an interest in interdisciplinary work. Test developers, language teachers, educational psychologists, psycholinguists, social theorists, even teachers in the 'hard sciences', all have a more than merely theoretical interest in finding answers to questions of how language enables learning, and how policies and practices can be improved. Eventually we need tests that will assist not only in placement, i.e. in some weaker or stronger form of gate-keeping, but also in enabling test-takers who would otherwise erroneously be kept either from achieving their full potential due to underperformance or failure or even be completely excluded from higher education opportunities.

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## END NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Figures provided by the most recent, i.e. 2002, census.

<sup>2</sup> On languages of learning in primary and secondary education, see (e.g.) Heugh 2000a, 2000b; Plüddemann et al 2000.

<sup>3</sup> The Association of Language Testers in Europe (ALTE), established in 1990, is an association of providers of foreign language examinations. Many of the world's leading language assessment bodies such as the Goethe Institute (German), the Alliance Francaise (French), the Cambridge ESOL group (English) and the Cervantes Institute (Spanish), are participating members. In 2005 there were 29 members representing the testing of 24 languages. The ALTE-framework has been developed as part of a Council of Europe project to find suitable levels of comparison for various language tests. The framework, known as the Common European Framework of Reference for Language Learning and Teaching (the CEF-framework), has established a system of six levels which allow for comparison across languages and across different testing bodies.

<sup>4</sup> Bachman 2000, reflecting on testing practices of the past 20 years, attributed to Einstein the adage 'not everything that counts can be counted, and not everything that can be counted counts'.

<sup>5</sup> This term is invoked to indemnify authorities that can often not provide such services for a variety of pragmatic reasons, such as lack of skilled interpreters or lack of funding to pay for interpreting services.

<sup>6</sup> Xhosa is the majority language of the Eastern Cape region, and according to recent demographic calculations will soon overtake Afrikaans as the majority language in the Western Cape.

<sup>7</sup> See e.g. Albert Weideman (2004) and Tobie van Dyk (2004).

<sup>8</sup> UCLES – acronym for University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate.

<sup>9</sup> Except in specific language courses, in special courses such as Afrikaans for professional purposes (e.g. in training medical physicians), a number of dual medium modules at UWC, etc.

<sup>10</sup> These universities were Stellenbosch University, Pretoria University, University of the Free State, Potchefstroom University (now North-West University) and Rand Afrikaans University (now Johannesburg University).

<sup>11</sup> The complete text of the Stellenbosch University language policy, recently the subject of intense debate, is given at <http://www.sun.ac.za/university/Taal/LangPolFinal2002.doc> (as on 12 Dec. 2005).

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